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ABSTRACT

Parents of handicapped children are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process affecting their children's education. Parent's rights are outlined and seven suggestions for productive participation in the educational process are provided, including learning about their child's special problem, communicating with the classroom teacher and other relevant school personnel, maintaining objectivity, and keeping a notebook. The paper concludes with a list of references. (LP)

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FOR PARENTS OF HANDICAPPED CHILDREN: TIPS FOR WORKING WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL

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For Your Information

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As a result of legislative and judicial actions, parents of handicapped children have been encouraged to participate in the decision-making process affecting their child's educational program. Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, contains a set of due process procedures to ensure the right of your child to a free appropriate education. As the parent of a handicapped child, you also have certain rights which are safeguarded. These rights include written notification before evaluation or educational placement, access to all records, the opportunity to obtain an independent evaluation of your child, to present complaints regarding the special education process, and for an impartial due process hearing. Due process procedures can be a tool for advancing a positive home-school relationship when viewed by both parents and school personnel as a means for obtaining a mutual goal—appropriate educational programs for handicapped children.

The idea of parents being involved in the planning of educational programs is a new situation for schools as well as parents. It may take a while for both parents and school personnel to feel comfortable in dealing with each other and respecting their areas of expertise. School personnel are the educational experts, but you are the expert on your child. Together you can work out a relationship that takes advantage of these strengths, which should result in a better program for your child.

In order to take full advantage of the opportunity to have a voice in the educational decisions for your child, you must become informed about your rights and what to do to make sure they are enforced. You must learn to become an effective advocate for your child. You can do so by becoming fully informed about your child's individual needs and about the programs and services that are currently available in your local school district.

In the process of participating with your school in the planning of your child's educational program, questions and problems may arise. The following are some suggestions which may be useful to you if this occurs:

- Learn as much as you can about your child's problem and about education of handicapped children in general. Read as much as you can on the subject, and talk with teachers, other professionals, doctors, and other parents whose children have similar problems.
- Keep in touch with your child's teacher and other people in your school district who are responsible for your child's education. Set up an appointment to discuss any concerns, either by scheduling a meeting or a phone conversation. It is best to preface the phone call with a note. Make sure that the reason for the conference is stated and suggest a time that will be convenient for everyone involved. Make sure to allow enough time to deal with the issue.
- Be sure to contact the individual that can solve your problem or question. For example, you are more likely to find a solution to a classroom problem if you deal directly with classroom personnel.
- Be objective. Present your concerns in a way that others can respond to them. Present facts to explain your concerns. Do not create a defensive mood where arguments are heard in place of solutions.

- Try to stay calm. If you start feeling angry or defensive, bring up a positive aspect of your child's educational program. Stay on that topic until you feel you are ready once again to address the topic of concern.
- Keep a notebook about your child's education. File there all copies of reports, educational plans, and communications to and from school officials. Have all communications in written form. If a conference took place by phone, ask for a letter to confirm decisions so that your record is complete.
- If you are unable to reach a solution to your problem through an informal approach, contact your principal and the director of special education in your district. A difficult problem often can be solved at this level. However, if it is not, you may want to consider bringing the problem before the local Board of Education. Your State Director of Special Education may also be of assistance here. Remember that the law clearly states that local school districts must provide appropriate special education services. If views differ significantly and a solution cannot be reached informally, formal procedures for the resolution of problems are available.

Remember that by keeping the lines of communication open with the school and by taking appropriate steps to solve your concerns, changes for your handicapped child may be brought about in a positive manner. This will not only benefit your child, but could also help other handicapped children and their parents.

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